

GORBACHEV'S DOMESTIC AGENDA

Since coming into office four months ago, Mikhail Gorbachev has made rapid progress toward what historically has been every new party chief's foremost goal--the expansion of his political power. He is also off to an excellent start on another high priority task--the reinvigoration of the party and state apparatus. Much more, however, remains to be done to realize his most difficult domestic tasks--the acceleration of Soviet economic growth and the improvement of quality and performance throughout the Soviet economy.

I. Expanding and Consolidating Power

Gorbachev has initially concentrated on expanding and consolidating his political power. To realize the full potential of his office, the General Secretary must enjoy the active support of other members of the ruling Politburo and be master of the Secretariat, the party's principal executive agent.

In April, Gorbachev engineered the promotion of three of his closest allies--Yegor Ligachev, Nikolay Ryzhkov, and KGB chief Viktor Chebrikov--to full Politburo status. In July, he ousted erstwhile rival Grigoriy Romanov from the Politburo and Secretariat and elevated Georgian party boss Eduard Shevardnadze to full Politburo membership. Shevardnadze was then quickly appointed Foreign Minister. Former Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko was promoted to the largely ceremonial post of head of state.

After only four months in office, Gorbachev has already engineered a greater number of promotions to the Politburo than either Yuriy Andropov, or Konstantin Chernenko.¹ He has also appointed as many party secretaries² as were named during Andropov's entire fifteen months in office.

¹ Under Andropov three officials--Geydar Aliyev, Mikhail Solomentsev, and Vitaliy Vorotnikov--became full Politburo members and Chebrikov was given candidate member status. There were no promotions to the Politburo during Chernenko's tenure.

² Ligachev, Ryzhkov, and Romanov became party secretaries under Andropov. There were no promotions to the Secretariat under Chernenko.

Despite this impressive display of power, there are hints that Gorbachev does not enjoy the unqualified support of all his Politburo colleagues. In a speech in Leningrad in May, for example, Gorbachev criticized the Politburo for being too timid in making a recent decision on agriculture. His criticism suggested that he had favored a bolder approach to the question. There also have been some unusual delays in the publication of major Gorbachev speeches--another possible indication of leadership disagreement. If Gorbachev's policies are indeed encountering opposition, the remaining members of the Brezhnev "old guard" are the most likely sources. Both former Premier Nikolay Tikhonov and Moscow city party boss Viktor Grishin are rumored to have opposed Gorbachev's accession to power.

II. Rebuilding Public Confidence

Rebuilding public confidence in the leadership and in officialdom is one of Gorbachev's major objectives, and he has skillfully tailored his public appearances and his media image to this end. He takes great care to orchestrate his meetings with the public, giving the appearance of knowing and caring about the life of citizens.

In addition, he has continued Andropov's anti-corruption drive and supplemented it with the anti-alcohol campaign. The uniformed police have been bolstered by a new political administration, and some 55,000 party members have been assigned to the police. While the results cannot be measured, there is evidence that Soviet officials are now far more careful about bribe-taking or other illicit activities. Accounts of arrests and massive sweeps of rural areas, however, suggest that priority has now shifted away from corruption to the anti-alcohol campaign. In any event, despite significant public approval for the struggle against drinking and corruption in principle, Gorbachev faces a long, difficult struggle before he can claim significant results in either area.

III. Revitalizing the Economy

A. Shaking Up the Party and State Apparatus

Gorbachev has also set himself the formidable task of reinvigorating the party and state apparatus through the replacement of long-tenured and complacent bureaucrats, including members of the Party's Central Committee. People on the Central Committee occupy critical posts in the party and state machinery; without their energetic support Gorbachev's domestic policy initiatives would be nothing more than paper proposals.

During the 1970s, Brezhnev's policy of cadre stability--a reaction to the frequent, often capricious personnel changes of the Khrushchev years--gave the members of the Central Committee a virtual guarantee of lifetime tenure. The resulting complacency and inertia contributed to a decline in economic growth and a rise in corruption.

Andropov launched a major campaign to replace incompetent and corrupt officials. His efforts, however, were cut short by his death. Under Chernenko, a champion of the Brezhnev old guard, personnel turnover slowed.

Gorbachev has picked up where Andropov left off. He has already replaced three heads of Central Committee departments, who play a major role in overseeing domestic policy, and appointed new party chiefs in the Georgian republic and Leningrad. The leadership of thirteen other regional party committees has also changed hands--more than during Chernenko's entire tenure.

Gorbachev has devoted particular effort to replacing poor performers among economic officials in the Council of Ministers. A deputy premier and ten ministerial-level officials have been replaced, several after humiliating public criticism. And only last week, on September 23, Tass announced that the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Nilokay Tikhonov, had resigned -- allegedly for reasons of poor health.

Still, some of the most powerful bureaucratic posts remain in the hands of Brezhnev-era holdovers whose approach to their assignments is the antithesis of Gorbachev's activism. Nikolay Baybakov, for example, Chairman of the State Planning Committee (Gosplan) is an elderly Brezhnev-era holdover likely to oppose change in his powerful bureaucratic empire. Until he and many others like him are removed from their posts, they are likely to obstruct Gorbachev's campaign to transform the creaking state machinery into an engine for change.

B. Improving Performance

Even sweeping personnel changes, however, will not be enough to achieve the most difficult domestic goals that Gorbachev has set--the acceleration of Soviet economic growth and higher standards of quality and performance throughout the Soviet economy. Gorbachev has acknowledged that this will require a long-term effort.

The centerpiece of Gorbachev's economic strategy is a call for re-equipping Soviet factories and farms with state-of-the-art machinery--an effort that will require a major increase in investment in the machine building sector. He apparently recognizes that previous attempts to shift investment resources have been frustrated by entrenched bureaucratic interests. To avoid such problems he has indicated that a reorganization of the economic bureaucracy will be a major part of his strategy.

Gorbachev is also banking on a stepped-up labor discipline campaign to bolster economic growth while waiting for the more long-term benefits of his modernization program and his organizational changes. He is using the threat of penalties for poor performance and a pledge to increase material rewards for good performance, to encourage better labor productivity.

Gorbachev's economic strategy has much to recommend it. Increased investment in the machine building sector is long overdue and the economic apparatus is badly in need of change. The outlook for his critically important industrial modernization program, however, is problematical. Implementation would require a degree of innovation in manufacturing that historically has been lacking. In addition, there is the risk that stepped-up investment in machinery manufacturing could divert resources from consumer and defense industries to an extent the regime would find unacceptable. Moreover, the increasing inaccessibility of domestic oil, coal and iron ore could hamper prospects for achieving high growth targets.

Gorbachev's achievements in expanding his power and in at least partially reinvigorating the party and state machinery should enhance his chances of pressing through with his economic program, but will not guarantee the program's success. Like previous Soviet party chiefs, he may discover that bureaucratic obstructionism, though it may yield for a time, tends to reemerge.

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